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## Notes From the Field: Culturally Adapted Research Methods for South Asian Participants

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# Notes From The Field: Culturally Adapted Research Methods for South Asian Participants

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*Agha and Rai*

## Abstract

South Asian immigrants form one of the largest immigrant groups in the United States. However, they remain understudied despite their large presence in the country. They are often lumped with other Asians or classified under the category “other” in national studies, which leads to a limited knowledge about this group. To address this methodological challenge, a representative multi-site sample of South Asian participants must be recruited to participate in research studies so their unique issues can be studied appropriately. This paper discusses best practices and culturally responsive ways of conducting ethical research with this unique population and delineates specific recruitment, sampling, and data collection approaches with South Asian immigrants. The authors, who are experts in conducting research within the South Asian diaspora add their experiences to enhance the discussion.

## Introduction

The South Asian (SA) population in the United States remains understudied even though there are 5.4 million SA-’s in the United States currently who trace their roots to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (SAALT, 2019). More than 75% of SA-’s are foreign born and have immigrated primarily through employment-based or family-sponsored channels. Women constitute 46% of the group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The SA culture adheres to collectivist values, which have been preserved among immigrant communities in the United States (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019; Zaidi, Couture-Carron, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2016). However, many of these upheld cultural values can be in conflict with America’s preference for individualism. Hence, immigrants and their families often face unprecedented challenges as they navigate multiple cultural contexts in the process of adapting new cultural norms (Gupta, Man, Mirchandani, & Ng, 2014). Despite the increasing number of SA-’s in the

U.S., research with SA participants has been limited due to issues pertaining to small or unrepresentative samples, use of culturally unresponsive instruments, and a lack of understanding of specific socio-cultural norms that confront the SA culture (Rai & Choi, 2018; Mahapatra, 2012; Murugan, 2018; Nagaraj, 2016).

## Problem Statement

Exposure to acculturative pressures, isolation, and dependence on the spouse have significant consequences for SA women whose financial and acculturative vulnerability increases manifold due to these structural and cultural barriers (Ahmad, Smylie, Omand, Cyriac, & Campbell, 2017). Therefore, domestic violence and mental health problems have become highly pervasive issues and remain top post-migration concerns for SA women. However, little is known about these issues in SA communities, allowing these problems to be overlooked (Purkayastha, 2002; Rai & Choi, 2018).

## Use of Culture as a Framework

The quality and applicability of social work research fundamentally relies on how well a study has been designed to reflect the culture and intersectional needs of its participants (Carpenter, 2016). Accordingly, it becomes imperative to move away from using “western” models of research with SA immigrants. Because culture provides a broad framework for understanding the world and helps people make sense of their daily experiences, a researcher’s ability to consider the study population’s culture at every stage of research establishes overall rigor and relevance. Without this framework of cultural relevance, eliciting information from SA-’s as well as other ethnically diverse populations becomes a futile endeavor for social work students and scholars. Furthermore, there is consensus among scholars regarding the challenging realm created by the intersectionality of identity-based factors that confront immigrants in a foreign country

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(Crenshaw, 1991; Kapur, Zajicek, & Gaber, 2017, Rai & Choi, 2018).

### **Approach**

To address gaps in research, social work scholars of SA origin, studying prevalence of domestic violence and mental health issues in SA immigrants in the United States convened at a panel discussion at a national social work research conference (Agha, Rai, Parekh, & Reddy, 2019) to discuss existing research methodologies with the SA population and to start a dialogue for adapting these methodologies to ensure cultural competency with SA communities. By centering the core cultural values and belief systems that prevail in SA-American communities, the four panelists discussed strategies for collecting data on domestic violence and mental health issues from representative samples, using quantitative methods such as surveys, standardized instruments and questionnaires, as well as qualitative methodologies such as focus groups, narratives, and interviews. The panelists deliberated on culturally specific ethical considerations integral to conducting research with vulnerable immigrant populations. They further discussed culturally apt techniques for minimizing the unique risks these groups may face.

### **Culturally Relevant Research Approaches with Diverse Populations**

Owing to intersectionality theory, culturally diverse populations such as the SA-'s have distinct experiences in the U.S. which may in turn add layers of complexity to the process of adjustment or integration. Factors such as immigration status, acculturation levels, language proficiency, employment, religion, religiosity, and experiences may differ widely even within the SA population (Crenshaw, 1991; Kapur et al., 2017). Keeping these unique needs and challenges in perspective, specific research methods and approaches while working with SA participants are discussed below.

### **Challenges with Data Collection**

Ethnic minority families in the United States

differ in their understanding, explanation and coping mechanisms of health issues which impacts their help seeking behaviors, including participation in research or new interventions (Alegria, Atkins, Farmer, Slaton, & Stelk, 2010). Likewise, researchers working on issues pertinent to SA populations are faced with myriad culture-specific challenges (Quay, Frimer, Janssen, & Lamers, 2017). These challenges primarily relate to quantitative data collection, qualitative data collection, and sampling strategies.

### **Quantitative Data Collection**

A large number of existing instruments for data collection are designed to capture the needs of the homogeneous western population (Paalman, Terwee, Jansma, & Jansen, 2013). However, this may also be because most research data are also generated in the western countries (Mano, Davies, & Klein-Tasman, 2009). In addition, random samples of minorities are unlikely to include an adequate number of SA participants. Yet another challenge is the use of self-report measures which is a standard procedure in the U.S. and other western countries but may be a new approach with some SA participants (Stewart, Thrasher, Goldberg, & Shea, 2012). Low representation of ethnic minorities in the general population is a fundamental problem with using a broad data collection approach (Redwood & Gill, 2013). Disaggregation has been another pivotal challenge relating to SA communities because large datasets lump all Asians together without examining for similarities or differences among groups (Murugan, 2018). With a fast-changing demographics of United States, there is an urgent need to develop or modify instruments to collect data from minorities. However, the increased time and cost to address language barriers may be a deterrent for researchers to include the SA population (Hussain-Gambles, Atkins, & Lees, 2006). To address this issue, sampling strategies such as snowball, purposive or use of social networks or agencies are likely to provide more representative samples for SA populations.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Data collection using focus groups, semi-

structured or in-depth interviews with SA's can provide rich data for further research, as well as development and implementation of interventions. However, recruitment of SA's remains a challenge. Engaging cultural brokers such as community leaders and those who have expertise in both SA and American cultures, and are able to navigate both cultures, for identifying, building trust, and active recruitment of participants are promising strategies (Mukherjea, Ivey, Shariff-Marco, Kapoor, & Allen, 2018). In addition, researchers must dedicate adequate time and resources such as personnel to accomplish this task. Building trust with the community and engaging with them as equal partners is a suitable approach to encourage SA participants to contribute to research. Being flexible and adaptable with the needs of the community is particularly important when working with immigrant communities. It is imperative for researchers to ensure that they make the participants feel valued and respected. Some ways in which this can be achieved is by agreeing to eat a meal with participants if invited, compensating participants for their time by providing a modest gift or gift card, showing respect for their family obligations, and ensuring that the participants are not inconvenienced at any point. One of most important aspect of conducting research with SA participants is for the researcher to know their language so that the participants are able to fully comprehend the intricacies of the interview process.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Identifying and addressing health disparities for SA's is an urgent need. Proper analysis and interpretation, including disaggregation by population segments for larger data sets are needed to address the gaps in research.

In the early stages of research and to determine if a need exists within a group, qualitative data is used which provides rich insight due to its flexible approach but is also highly subjective (Padgett, 1998; Padgett, 2004). Quantitative data, on the other hand, reveals hard facts, such as those captured by various measures. Whether using qualitative or quantitative methods, various approaches such as content analysis and thematic analysis for qualitative data, and t-tests and regression analysis are some of the most used

methods.

The rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative process is generally ensured by thoroughness in collecting data and by addressing credibility, transferability, auditability, and confirmability (Beck, 2009). Whereas, for quantitative methods, methodological rigor refers to soundness in study design, data collection, analysis and reporting (Marquart, 2017). Whether qualitative or quantitative methods, or a combination of methods is chosen, a carefully designed study must be rigorous and generalizable or transferable. The differences in contributions by both forms of analysis must be understood to be fully appreciated. Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data will be more precise if the researchers have competency with the SA culture.

### Ethical Responsibility

Within the realm of ethical research with vulnerable populations, research with a group that is newly arrived in the country and has limited language proficiency, warrants meticulous attention to research ethics. Social workers' ethical responsibility to SA clients includes using evidence-based practice to combine well-researched interventions with clinical experience, ethics, client preferences and culture to guide and inform the delivery of treatment and services (NASW, 2018). The specifics of how participants are recruited, how informed consent is explained and obtained, and the manner in which evidence is evaluated, all falls under the moral obligation to ethics. As with all culturally, ethnically, or linguistically diverse clients from a variety of ethnicities, SA clients must also be served using these guidelines. This may also mean training social work practitioners so that the service, supervision, and consultation that are delivered to the SA clients are appropriate becomes the necessary next step.

Given the fact that there is limited research on SA populations in the U.S., and the work that does exist is mostly conducted in the UK or Canada, it is even more timely to conduct research and disseminate findings that add to the knowledge base for this culturally rich and diverse population (Khouidja & Platt, 2017; Quay et al, 2017).

## Conclusion

South Asia is a vast region, and although SA-'s share many common values, even within the SA population differences exist based on religion, region, education and cultural practices, and these differences are even more stark for women (Wigfield & Turner, 2012). This discussion of effective strategies and promising practices is ongoing, and at the end of the presentation (Agha et al., 2019) the panelists were able to: a) explain the implications of applying western-based approaches to linguistically and culturally diverse populations; b) discuss culturally competent techniques for data collection, analysis, and interpretation; and c) describe the ethics of research with SA immigrant participants. This interactive discussion delivered insight into culturally competent research and practice as a means for expanding the current state of knowledge and increasing participation to ultimately better serve and meet the needs of SA-'s. Panelists concluded with an emphasis on the need for providing cultural awareness and consciousness training to social work professionals as they undertake research and practice.

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